

INTERNET SAFETY AND COMMUNICATION

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TEXTING

There's a generation gap in the way cell phones are used: Parents talk and their children text. Kids talk too, of course, but more often they use their phones to send text messages or pictures. According to Nielsen research, texting on mobile phones is now more common than calling. In one 3-month period of 2008, users aged 13-17 averaged 1,742 text messages monthly compared to just 231 mobile phone calls.

Teens and pre-teens have mastered texting technique and its sometimes obscure lingo. They leave most of their parents far behind in this respect. But they are not always skilled at protecting themselves from the threats that come with this technology. Parents need to understand these risks, which are serious and can have long-lasting effects.

It's public—and for keeps

If there's one lesson that children need to know, it is that no text or picture is private once it's sent. Not only can it be passed along to countless strangers, via other phones or the Internet, but you can never be sure it won't turn up again.

"You have to understand that, once it leaves your phone, you have no control over where it's going to go," says Julie Bruns, a prosecuting attorney in Dayton, Ohio. (Bruns oversees cases involving "sexting," the posting of sexual language and nude or semi-nude pictures via cell phone.) "Once it gets on the Internet, you have no control over it."

Psychologist Susan Bartell, author of the book *Top 50 Questions Kids Ask – 3rd Through 5th Grade*, says even 4th graders understand e-mail and can be shown how "any picture that you take with your phone can end up on the Internet." At that age, Bartell adds, they can be told not to take a picture of themselves or anyone else without clothes on. They should also know not to take a picture of anybody (themselves included) doing anything that they would get in trouble for if an adult found out.

As kids get older, the message needs to be more explicit. Never, for instance, send a picture of yourself or anyone else using drugs or alcohol. They also need to be on guard with phone users around them. Bartell says they should be told, "Don't let people take pictures of you in compromising positions. If they take a picture, tell them immediately to delete it from their phone."

Sexting and self-esteem

Bruns, head of the juvenile division under Montgomery County's prosecutor, runs a diversion program to counsel young people involved in sexting. She says she sees about 20 to 30 cases of sexting in a given school year, mainly in the 12-15 age group. Typically, girls take nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves for a boyfriend, thinking that he would never pass it on to anyone else.

The issues here go beyond naivete and carelessness with technology, she says: "The level of self-esteem of girls who engage in this kind of conduct is concerning." Bartell says parents need to talk with girls about sexting much as they should talk with them about sex. She suggests the message should be about "respecting your own body" and not giving in to pressure from boyfriends.

Setting limits

Parents can help protect their children by setting rules for when and where cell phones are to be used. Marian Merritt, an Internet safety advocate at Symantec Corp., says parents can prevent use of cell phones at night by insisting that the phones be charged overnight outside the child's room. She also advises parents to know all the passwords on their child's mobile device.

Cell phone service providers also can help. "Some have robust systems for limiting sites visited, and also have the ability to shut phones off during certain hours," Merritt says. She urges parents to check with the providers first before buying third-party products that promise to monitor or control kids' cell phone use.

Staying in touch by learning to text

No product is more crucial than what Merritt calls "the software our children carry between their ears." To keep their children safe, parents should communicate with them early and often. Learning to communicate in the kids' own medium can make it easier.

Learning to text and then using that technology to stay in touch with their children gives parents at least 2 benefits.

- It keeps them in the loop about what their kids are doing and thinking.
- It builds a bridge of trust. Merritt says children can be held back from telling their parents about bullying and other texting abuses because they fear the parents "will react against the technology." When the parents are texting, they signal to youngsters that texting is not the problem.

Besides, she says, it's "good for children's self-esteem" to be able to teach their parents something.

Resources

Parents interested in learning how to text can get started with AT&T Wireless' online primer "TXT2Connect With Kids" at www.wireless.att.com/learn/en_US/pdf/txt2connect-tutorial.pdf.

A number of Internet sites (including AT&T's guide above) provide some help translating texting lingo. The most comprehensive list may be at <http://vps.netlingo.com/acronyms.php>. See also "Top 50 Acronyms Parents Need to Know" at <http://www.netlingo.com/top50/acronyms-for-parents.php>.

Sources: Julie Bruns, assistant prosecuting attorney and head of juvenile division, Montgomery County Prosecutor's Office, Dayton Ohio; Susan Bartell, PsyD, www.drSusanBartell.com; Marian Merritt, Norton Internet Safety Advocate, Symantec

Corp. The Nielsen data on mobile phone texting can be found at http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/in-us-text-messaging-tops-mobile-phone-calling.

By Tom Gray

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STAYING SAFE AT SOCIAL-NETWORKING WEBSITES

Innovators on the Internet are constantly coming up with new ways for friends, family and strangers to communicate. But from e-mail to chat rooms to blogs to Facebook, the risks never change. The Internet is a public place, and not everyone out there is on your side.

The rise of social-networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook has brought new twists to old safety issues. Social networking enables users to post personal information, pictures and opinions to wide audiences. Some of the “friends” who see your posts may be people you know and trust. Others with that label may be only friends of those friends, or even total strangers.

The ‘net doesn’t forget

It’s easy to forget how easy it is to get in trouble—if not now, then later.

Maybe years later. One fact about the Internet is that nothing ever truly goes away. Parents must constantly remind their children (and themselves) of this fact. Young teens can post embarrassing pictures or offensive remarks and forget about them, until they’re spotted by a college admissions department or a prospective employer.

Teens are mistaken when they say nobody cares about what they post, says Symantec Corp. safety advocate Marian Merritt. “The majority of university admission programs are looking at social networks; the majority of job interviewers are looking at social networks,” she says. Removing text or pictures from your social-network page does not guarantee that no one will see them. They could easily have been downloaded by others in the short time they were on the Web.

Don’t hand out “puzzle pieces”

Parents and children also need to be careful not to give criminals an opening by posting too much personal information. The Internet’s lack of direct personal contact heightens this risk, says Julie Bruns. Bruns is a prosecutor who runs the juvenile division in the office of Montgomery County (Ohio) Prosecutor Mathias H. Heck Jr. “Where you don’t have to talk to someone face to face, it’s a lot easier to give up information,” says Bruns. “We lower our defenses ... there’s a computer we’re looking at—what’s the harm?”

People picking up that information can do plenty of harm, and they don’t need that much data. Bruns says people often “don’t understand how little tidbits of information that they put on the Internet are like puzzle pieces to predators.”

Bruns, Merritt and other experts offer tips to help parents and their children navigate social networking safely:

- **Keep private information offline.** Parents should explain to preteens and teens why certain data about themselves, their family and their friends should not be posted. This includes full names, Social Security numbers, street addresses, phone numbers and financial information. Screen names should shield personal information that you don't want strangers to know, such as a child's age, full name and hometown. Adults and kids should not post messages that announce travel plans or indicate where children go to school.
- **Make the most of privacy settings.** If you're not comfortable with the access that people have to your information on a social-networking site, find a more restrictive site. And don't settle for the default settings, which can be too loose, especially for youngsters. Merritt notes that a setting under which your photos are shared with all "friends" can put your face in front of hundreds of people you barely know. When it comes to choosing privacy settings, she says, "People should look at the choices available to them, and when in doubt, be restrictive."
- **Seek safety in groups.** Signify different groups that get different types of information. Family members, for instance, could get access to information that would be off-limits to co-workers or classmates.
- **Parents should be friends, too.** Parents should make sure that their children give them full "friend" status on sites such as Facebook, says psychologist Susan Bartell. This gives them access to the same network of sites and information that their kids are seeing.
- **Don't hover, but do monitor.** Parents should take their "friend" role seriously, paying attention to profiles and other data posted by and about their children. They can get help from services such as Symantec's OnlineFamily. Norton (at www.onlinefamily.norton.com). This site enables parents to see which social-networking sites their kids are visiting. But, says Merritt, "You should also show a little restraint. I know parents who comment on everything their children post. This can drive them underground. You're monitoring, but not hovering."
- **Keep it clean, keep it positive.** Bullying, posting of revealing photos, spreading of malicious gossip and sex talk are always out of line. Children should be told from the start of their social networking "only to publicize positive things about themselves and other people," says Bartell. They need to understand clearly that what looks like harmless fun now can kill a chance for admission to a college or a job later. Kids should know all the different forms that bullying can take. This includes spreading rumors or posting private messages without the senders' approval.

Parents should tell their children to trust their instincts—and tell parents—if they see something online that makes them feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Resources

The Federal Trade Commission

www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec13.shtm (for parents) <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm> (for "tweens" and teens)

Marian Merritt's "Ask Marian" blog

Symantec

Sources: Julie Bruns, assistant prosecuting attorney and head of juvenile division, Montgomery County Prosecutor's Office, Dayton, Ohio; Susan Bartell, PsyD, www.drSusanBartell.com; Marian Merritt, Norton Internet safety advocate, Symantec Corp.; U.S. Federal Trade Commission

By Tom Gray

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FACE-TO-FACE CONNECTING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

What did we do before e-mails, cell phones, voicemail and texting? Young people can't imagine a time before instant communication.

The advantages are many. We can telecommute for work, which saves time and money and gives us a better work-life balance. We can communicate with ease and speed with friends and customers around the world. So what's the problem?

Human beings are a social species. We are designed for face-to-face communication. We are wired to read facial expressions and body language on a near subconscious level. When we laugh together, smile at one another, shake hands, or share a meal, we bond on a primal level that cannot be replaced by electronic communication. We literally take in many cues from our various senses—sight, sound, feel, taste and smell—when we interact face-to-face. There's even scientific evidence that we react to and process the scent of others on a subconscious or unconscious chemical level.

All this various sensory information lets us make better assessments of people and situations and establish lasting bonds. It's exactly the kind of information not accessible to us electronically.

Phone contact and video conferencing help somewhat—we can hear the tone of someone's voice or interpret a fleeting look or gesture onscreen—but neither will ever replace the warmth and bonding of in-person communication.

The positives of face-to-face communication

Think of face-to-face interactions as the glue that cements any relationship—work or personal. When face-to-face, we can:

- **Make eye contact**—to show our sincerity, to establish a firm connection, and to look into the "soul" of another person.
- **Smile**—and in general, give and receive cues from each other's facial expressions.
- **Connect with a firm handshake** or another physical touch or gesture appropriate for the situation.
- **Listen**—Only in face-to-face meetings can we show that we're listening and see if others are truly listening to us.
- **Gather information.** When we're with someone in an office, a car, a restaurant, or their home, we can see and hear and respond to a variety of outside prompts that will open the door to more opportunities and provide clues to a person's personality, attitudes and lifestyle.

- **Get better feedback.** Face-to-face, we are much better able to gauge someone's response and determine whether they're being honest or not.

Even people who are very good at written communication need to schedule face-to-face interactions with important business associates, relatives and friends, as we tend to trust and turn to those we see regularly. Dealing with someone solely by digital communication sends the message, intended or not, that they are not that important. There's something cold and distant about it, which is why it's easier to deliver bad news or blow off someone electronically, whether we're rejecting a business offer or declining a party invitation. It's easier to say "no" over the wires.

If we never meet someone face-to-face, they will, in some ways, be a stranger and, thus, easier to dismiss. Make sure you schedule a certain amount of face time when you want:

- an ongoing business relationship, not just a periodic filling of orders
- an ongoing personal relationship
- people to know you in all your complexity, and when you truly want to get to know them
- to address complicated or sensitive issues
- to motivate people and share enthusiasm
- to network and meet new people or customers
- to maintain friendships
- to share personal information

Misunderstandings

It's hard to convey emotion and tone in e-mail and texts despite our attempts to give hints with various emoticons like punctuated, winking smiley faces ;-)) and chat-speak—such as "LOL" (laugh out loud). Often, the attitude or intent behind the words is lost in translation, and misunderstandings occur. Shy people may come off as cold, succinct people may come off as rude (think of those who give one-word replies), and funny people may come off as insensitive. Sarcasm is especially tricky and should be avoided unless you know your recipient well.

This is another advantage of meeting business associates and online friends face-to-face on occasion. Seeing them in-person will give you much needed insight into their personality and current situation—do they look sick, tired, happy, stressed? This will help you craft your e-mails to them and read between the lines of theirs.

Make the effort

In addition to fortifying relationships, regular personal encounters help ward off depression and its many ill effects. A recent study found that happiness can be contagious, but only when we're in close proximity to the happy person. Remember, we are wired to belong, to feel like part of the tribe. So stop hiding behind your BlackBerry® and make the effort to schedule:

- lunches, dinners and events with significant friends, relatives and business associates
- seasonal or annual trips to meet important clients, business partners, friends and relatives

- fun and revitalizing bonding experiences—camping trips, team-building exercises, weekend getaways, and/or sporting events, concerts, art shows, etc.
- business, social and/or hobby-related meetings and conferences
- continuing education classes for work or pleasure

If you telecommute, schedule regular, quality face-time with co-workers. If you find yourself isolated by working at home or in a quiet cubicle, take your laptop to the lunch room or local coffee shop and interact with others.

Resources

Face to Face: How to Reclaim the Personal Touch in a Digital World by Susan RoAne, Fireside, 2008.

The Leader's Communication Toolkit: How to Select the Right Communication in an Electronic World by Becky L. Stewart-Gross, PhD, HRD Press, 2004.

Savvy Networking by Andrea Nierenberg, Capital Books, 2007.

By Amy Fries

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TOO MUCH INFORMATION? HERE'S HOW TO CUT STRESS AND STAY CONNECTED

Just what you need: More information. But don't tune out this article just yet. Read on, because it will help you handle the flood of e-mails, news, cell phone calls, text messages and all the other distractions and annoyances that modern technology throws at you.

Believe it or not, all that information can be managed. You can stay in touch with co-workers, friends and the rest of the world while lowering your stress level.

If you feel stress from TMI (too much information), you're not alone. A recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that workers have mixed views of the Internet and e-mail. Among the 62 percent of adults who say they use such technology at work:

- 80 percent say it has improved their ability to do their jobs
- 58 percent say it gives them more flexibility in their work hours
- 49 percent say the Internet and e-mail increase the level of stress in their job
- 49 percent say these tools make it harder for them to disconnect from work when they are at home and on weekends

Attention a limited resource

Psychologists and other experts say the stress of TMI springs from a basic fact about the human brain: Its ability to process what we read, hear and think in real time is not unlimited. "Attention is a limited resource," says Stuart Sidle, a

professor of industrial psychology at the University of New Haven. We can only take in and respond to so much information effectively.

When the load gets to be too much, we try to divide our attention by multi-tasking. But multi-tasking (answering a BlackBerry® message, for instance, while trying to pay attention at a meeting) is neither easy nor efficient. Most people don't do it very well.

When you multi-task, says psychologist Jean Cirillo, "you never do as well on one task as if you had focused on that task alone" because you have to use energy ignoring one of the tasks while doing the other. "Even if you have five senses, they go into the same brain," she says, and it takes effort to tune out distractions.

Managing TMI

Here are some tips for conserving your attention, fighting information fatigue and making sure that you're not part of someone else's TMI problem:

- **Take control of your time.** You can't control when people might want to send you an e-mail or text message or call you. You can, however, have some say over how and when you respond to information coming at you. For instance, you can let others know that you might not answer a message right away at certain times when you need to focus on your work. "Speak your mind about how you would like to be reached," says Sidle. Cirillo advises, "Tell people you check your e-mail at a certain time."

Both Sidle and Cirillo acknowledge that your ability to control your time depends on your position in the organization. Putting your boss on hold may not be a smart move, but not everyone sending you e-mails needs to get the same level of attention. "Everything can't be a top priority," says Sidle. "People have to prioritize and be clear on that."

- **Follow the 10-minute rule.** You can waste a lot of time surfing the Internet. You can also spend far too much time trying to catch up on long-deferred tasks such as cleaning out your e-mail in-box or getting rid of unneeded bookmarks. Management consultant Karen Leland recommends applying a 10-minute rule to such activities, as well as answering e-mails. Give yourself 10 minutes at a time for surfing or for checking out bookmarked sites to see if you still want them on your list (or take 10 minutes to organize your bookmarks into folders).

Leland has a similar rule for answering e-mail messages. "If an e-mail takes 10 minutes or less to handle, deal with it then," she says. Otherwise, delete it or delegate it to someone else to handle. A few e-mails may have to be set aside for later, but the first 3 of Leland's 4 "D's"—dump, delegate, do or defer—should take care of most of them.

- **Turn off the bells and whistles.** If you need to focus on the work at hand, the last thing you need is a computer or phone that breaks your concentration. Leland advises muting computer sounds, such as "the ding on incoming e-mail," and silencing your cell phone.
- **Use technology to manage the info-load.** The same tools that deluge you with information can be used to make that information less stressful to handle. For example, the calendar feature of Microsoft Outlook can be used as a

way to set up meetings and send invitations. That cuts the e-mail flow while getting the needed information into the right hands. Managers can reduce office e-mail even further by requiring that non-essential messages—on the question of, say, where to have lunch—be posted on a Web site rather than be circulated.

- **Cull your subscriptions.** Look over the mail clogging your in-box. Some of it may be truly unwanted—genuine junk mail—but much of it may come from sources that once put you on their list because you asked them to. Take 10 minutes now and then to sort through the incoming mail and cancel subscriptions for newsletters and other features that you find you've stopped reading. The same rule can be applied to more traditional forms of information, such as magazines.
- **Don't waste words.** Short, clear messages take less time to read, thus easing the burden on recipients. For senders, a message that gets to the point clearly and succinctly is more likely to be read and understood than a long-winded one. "Communicate with impact so that your message is not lost in the crowd and people aren't stressed trying to figure it out," says Sidle, who advises senders to craft their longer messages like news stories—in so-called "inverted pyramid" style, with the most important facts first.
- **Be careful what you forward, and minimize your carbon-copy footprint.** In other words, don't be part of the problem. "When you 'cc' people who really don't have a need to know, you end up wasting their time and you end up sending them information that doesn't need to be in their work space," says Leland. The same goes for excessive forwarding. It takes just a few keystrokes to carbon-copy and forward messages to a mailing list. But think twice before doing so, and think about all the people who will have to read your message. Their time is every bit as valuable as yours.

Sources: Stuart Sidle, PhD, professor of industrial psychology, University of New Haven; Karen Leland, Sterling Consulting Group Inc.; Jean Cirillo, PhD

Resources

Time Management in an Instant: 60 Ways to Make the Most of Your Day by Karen Leland and Keith Bailey. Career Press, 2008.

E-Mail in an Instant: How to Communicate With Style and Impact by Karen Leland. Career Press, 2009.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Self-Testing Your IQ by Jean Cirillo. Alpha, 2008.

By Tom Gray

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FAQS ABOUT SAFETY

How do I eliminate safety hazards in my own home?

Accidental deaths of children follow a tragic but consistent pattern every year. The most common causes of accidental death in children in the home are fires, drowning, choking, falls, poisoning and firearms. Below are ways you can protect your children from these hazards:

- Store matches and lighters in a secure place out of reach of children.
- Never smoke or drink hot beverages while holding small children or infants.
- Keep hot items away from the edge of tables and counters. Use rear burners as much as possible and turn handles toward the back of the stove.
- Always check the water temperature in a tub with your forearm before putting a child in it. To be sure, use a thermometer to test the water's temperature.
- Unplug appliances and power tools when not in use.
- Put safety plugs on all unused electrical outlets.
- Always stay with children who are in the tub.
- If you are using a large bucket to hold cleaning water, don't leave a child unattended near it even to answer the phone. Children can drown in one inch of water.
- Keep small objects such as crayons, jewelry and deflated balloons out of the reach of children.
- Check with your doctor before giving a young child a possibly dangerous food.
- Learn the Heimlich maneuver for infants and children.
- Install safety gates at the top and bottom of stairways, but avoid the type with wide openings that could trap a child's neck. If you can push a 6-inch ball through it, it's dangerous for kids.
- Keep floors and stairways well-lit and clear of clutter.
- Remove sharp edged furniture or use stick-on edge guards.
- Clean up spills immediately and put non-slip rugs in the bathroom.
- Strap infants into highchairs and strollers.
- Don't let children play on a fire escape or balcony.
- Never rely on a window screen to prevent falls, and keep anything a child could climb on such as a desk or chair away from a window.
- Install window safety guards.
- Never leave babies alone on beds, changing tables or sofas.
- Keep anything poisonous to children out of reach and locked away.
- Install safety latches on all cupboards, drawers and closet doors.
- Don't take medication in front of a child or call pills candy.
- Have all emergency phone numbers including the phone number of your local poison control center clearly posted near all phones.
- Keep any guns out of sight and securely locked up with ammunition in a separate place. Guns should remain unloaded with their safety locks on until you use them.
- Explain to children how dangerous guns are, despite what they may see on TV, and that they should tell you as

soon as they find one, even if they're at a friend's house.

How do I ensure my child's safety when he is not in his own home?

While you probably can't be with your child all the time, you can help him by teaching them the basics of personal safety:

- He should never play with or even touch a gun without adult supervision.
- He should always walk with a friend or relative when walking on the street or in a parking lot. He should stick to well-lit, well-traveled places even if it means a longer walk. He should be aware of possible dangers all the time.
- He should never get close enough to a car that someone could jump out of one or grab him.
- He should never hitchhike or accept a ride from a stranger, even one who says, "Your mother sent me to bring you home."
- He should make a scene the moment he feels physically threatened by anyone.

Your attitude toward teaching safe practices to your child is important in helping her to be appropriately vigilant when she is not with you.

Source: ValueOptions® Making Life Easier Program

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